

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Speaker 1: Before we get into the story that you have to tell me, were you in the area during the blizzard of '49 and where were you?

Keith: I was right here in Cheyenne.

Speaker 1: How old of a guy were you in '49 approximately?

Keith: Let's see. I was born in '32, what would that make me, about 15 or something?

Speaker 1: Do you remember the storm well here in Cheyenne?

Keith: Very well, yes.

Speaker 1: Can you tell me a little bit about what Cheyenne looked like during that storm?

Keith: The thing come in unexpectedly on Sunday night. Of course, in those days, we weren't fortunate enough to have all the forecasts and everything we've got now. It caught everybody by surprise. The storm came in, and it started snowing. I think one of the things that was bad about the storm was it was so cold, and the wind blew so hard. The snow just kept piling up and, of course, everybody stayed in. The streets and the town was pretty well closed down.

Speaker 1: Do you remember having days off from school then or were the schools remained open?

Keith: No. The schools closed for 3 or 4 days after that till they could get the streets cleared and everybody back to normal again.

Speaker 1: Right. I've been doing a lot of research, photo research. I found a bunch of photos of Cheyenne, and I got photos where there's cars buried almost up to their roofs and huge snow drifts in downtown area.

Keith: The wind was so bad with it is one of the things [00:02:00] that caused the blizzard to be so severe is the terrible winds with it. When we went down to pick up the bodies of my aunt and uncle and 2 cousins that froze to death, it was east of Rockport, south of Cheyenne at Rockport. We found rocks up on top of the snow. Maybe it was a 1/2 inch, 3/4 inch rocks that the wind had blown up on top of the snow. That was what was so vicious about it.

Speaker 1: Somebody showed me a picture the other day of this flat, snow-covered field and what looked like round bails of hay in it covered with snow, but it wasn't.

The wind had taken the snow and turned them into what looked like bails of hay. It was the most remarkable thing I've ever seen.

Keith: It was unbelievable, the wind. That was one of the things that made it so severe. We were here in town, and my grandfather's homestead is west of the car turnoff on Interstate 25, and we were all worried about him because he was fairly old by himself on the homestead. Of course, in those days, we didn't have any telephone or now we've got all this nice communications. We were worried about him, and he was smartest one of the bunch. He was in the house and of course, in those old places, they kept the coal and stuff in the basement, and the basement had an outside entrance that you had to raise a couple of trap doors to get down. He was smart enough not [00:04:00] to go outside. He just sawed a hole in the floor and went down the basement, got his coal, and he survived wonderful. He was in there where it was warm and nice. We finally got down to check on him, and we had to shovel our way in to get him out of the house. It was just tremendous snow drifts all the way around. The snow didn't melt real fast and during the summer in about July, the snow finally went away, and we found all the chickens underneath an old trailer out there that got caught in there, and they were all ... They didn't survive.

Speaker 1: Your grandfather actually cut a hole in the floor of his house to get down into the basement rather than go outside.

Keith: Mm-hmm (affirmative), rather than go outside. We thought he was pretty smart for doing that.

Speaker 1: Indeed. Some people have been telling me that they got up that morning to try to go out their door, and the doors that opened outwards, they were out of luck because the snow had piled up, and they couldn't get out. One guy said his dad took off the storm door as the storm was going on because he knew it opened to the outside, and the other one opened to the inside. He was able to dig out that way.

Keith: It was unbelievable.

Speaker 1: You were in Cheyenne here and did you notice as a kid, were there many military vehicles, snow plows of that nature in town and these things called little weasels, these track vehicles or was that maybe more in the countryside?

Keith: I think they were more out in the country, the rescuing people and getting [00:06:00], giving them supplies and food and things because when you were out there in the country, you didn't get in very well for a long time. When we went out to check on my grandfather, we had quite a time getting out there. We had a 4-wheel drive vehicle, and we had to go around the snow drifts. There was some

places that was blown fairly clean where the wind had blown it clean. You just had to pick your way to get through the snow.

Speaker 1: Right. Weren't 4-wheel drive vehicles a rarity in '49?

Keith: Yes.

Speaker 1: What did you have? Do you recall?

Keith: It was a jeep, and I think it was one of the first jeep pickups that came out. My uncle worked for the Warren Livestock company, and he had access to a 4-wheel drive, and that's the way we got out there.

Speaker 1: Got you. Do you know anything about the Rockport story with all the people trapped in that café at Rockport at all? Do you know that story?

Keith: Yes. There was, I don't know how many people, but they were overcrowded. They got that far coming up out of Colorado, and they just got stranded there. I'll tell you the story about my aunt and uncle. They were visiting. They lived east of Rockport about 4 or 5 miles, and they went to visit their neighbors, which was about 3 1/2 miles away on Sunday. They decided to start home, and it was Sunday afternoon. They got about [00:08:00] 3/4 of a mile from the house, and the pickup got stuck. In those days, I think they had about a '41 Ford pickup, something like that. Those pickups weren't very big, and they had the 2 kids, and they had the 4 of them in there. They got stuck, so my uncle walked back to the house and got the neighbors, and they started down in their pickup, and they got a little ways from the house, and they got stuck. That's how fast this blizzard come up. They decided to walk on down and get my aunt and the 2 kids. They got down there, and it was so bad then that they couldn't start home. Apparently they decided they'd stay in the pickup.

A lot of storms blow over overnight. They stayed and stayed, and it got colder and colder, so they decided that they'd start back. They started walking back, and the 2 neighbors survived the walk, and they said that my aunt and uncle were trying to hold up a blanket, so the kids could walk behind it, and it just didn't work. They went and went, and the kids couldn't make it. When they found the bodies, my aunt was reaching down on her knee to get the little girl, and she froze in that position. My uncle was trying to hold up the boy, and they found them frozen in that position. The 2 neighbors walked on towards their house, and they were lost. They came to this barbed wire fence that they recognized. There's a [00:10:00] boy and his son, and the dad, he didn't think he could make it, but they kept prodding along, and they made it back to the house. The son, his hand froze, and it started swelling up. He couldn't hardly get it in a bucket. They sat the blizzard out, I don't know how many days it was till it

subsided, and they decided to walk to the highway, which is about 2 miles, I suppose, or a little better.

They walked out there, and he tried flag down a car, and he flagged a car down. Of course, the people at Rockport had already moved out, and the people didn't believe him. Finally, he flagged down one that believed him, and they got a report in Cheyenne, what had happened. Excuse me. They went down to pick up the bodies, and they had to get a Caterpillar, and they had an old wagon, iron-tired wagon, and they hooked it on and pulled it out there through the drifts and so forth and loaded the bodies on and took them to the highway. It was a tragedy for our family to lose a whole family like that.

Speaker 1: Absolutely. That's such a sad story. What else? Your family was involved in ranching, some?

Keith: Yes.

Speaker 1: Did your family or neighbors lose a lot of livestock during the blizzard?

Keith: Yes. I think that my grandfather, he had sheep, and he lost quite a few sheep. The sheep would get [00:12:00] ... They'd drift until they hit a fence, and that's where you'd find them, just balled up on the fence. There was a livestock lost in that blizzard and a lot of wild game lost in that blizzard.

Speaker 1: I was just talking to the guy from a guy in game and fish, and he said the antelope really took it hard over by Red Desert. Interestingly enough, a lot of them were hit by trains because that's where it was clear, and that's where they drifted down to. What else? I had something in my head and now it's gone.

Speaker 3: That happens a lot.

Speaker 4: He's not old enough for that.

Speaker 1: I think that's it unless there's anything else that you can remember and want to talk about.

Keith: That's about the worst of it. The bad part of it is, nowadays we don't realize how things were because we've got cell phones, and we've got flip on the television that tells us when the snow is coming and how much. We're very fortunate to be in a situation where we have those things to rely on.

Speaker 1: Right. I guess they called in the US Army eventually with the big bulldozer operation to dig out the west because it wasn't just Wyoming, as you know. It was Northern Colorado and Nebraska.

Keith: The railroad was drifted in, snowed in for days before they could get the drifts all cleared off.

Speaker 1: Keith, I think that's going to do it. We can [00:14:00] fold this up. Turn on the-